

Fugitives

Then we woke and were hurtling headlong
for wealds and wolds,
blood coursing, the Dee and the Nidd in full spate
through the spinning waterwheels in the wrists
and over the heart's weir,
the nightingale hip-hopping ten to the dozen
under the morning's fringe.

It was no easy leap, to exit the engine house of the head
and vault the electric fence
of commonplace things,
to open the door of the century's driverless hearse,
roll from the long cortège
then dust down and follow
the twisting ribbon of polecats wriggling free from extinction
or slipstream the red kite's triumphant flypast out of oblivion
or trail the catnip of spraint and scat tingeing the morning breeze.

On we journeyed at full tilt
through traffic-light orchards,
the brain's compass dialling for fell, moor,
escarpment and shore, the skull's sextant
plotting for free states coloured green on the map,
using hedgerows as handrails,
barrows and crags as trig points and cats' eyes.

We stuck to the switchbacks and scenic routes,
steered by the earth's contours and natural lines of desire,
feet firm on solid footings of bedrock and soil
fracked only by moles.
We skimmed across mudflat and saltmarsh,
clambered to stony pulpits on high hills
inhaling gallons of pure sky
into the moors of our lungs,
bartered bitcoins of glittering shingle and shale.

Then arrived in safe havens, entered the zones,
stood in the grandstands of bluffs and ghylls, spectators
to flying ponies grazing wild grass to carpeted lawns,
oaks flaunting turtle doves on their ring-fingers,
ospreys fishing the lakes from invisible pulleys and hoists,
the falcon back on its see-through pivot, lured from its gyre.

Here was nature as future,
the satellite dishes of blue convolvulus
tuned to the cosmos, tracking the chatter of stars,
the micro-gadgets of complex insects
working the fields, heaths tractored by beetles,
rainbowed hay meadows tipsy with mist and light,
golden gravel hoarded in eskers and streams.

And we vowed not to slumber again
but claimed sanctuary
under the kittiwake's siren
and corncrake's alarm,
in realms patrolled by sleepwalking becks and creeks
where beauty employs its own border police.

And witnessed ancient trees
affirming their citizenship of the land,
and hunkered and swore oaths, made laws
in hidden parliaments of bays and coves,
then gathered on commons and capes
waving passports of open palms, medalled by dog rose and teasel
and raising the flag of air.

b y
Simon Armitage

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty commissioned this poem to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which paved the way for the creation of the UK's 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Act sat alongside the complementary National Health Service Act in a visionary recognition of the vital links between health and access to nature for all.

“I was delighted to be asked to work with the NAAONB on this auspicious occasion. They are an institution that safeguards and celebrates all that is good about the world we live in, and an organisation whose values I share and trust. The relationship between poetry and the land in this country goes back to the very origins of poetic utterance and I'm proud to be making a contribution to that ongoing dialogue. There is no greater challenge for a contemporary laureate and geography graduate than to contribute artistically to a conversation about the natural world and the state of our planet, and to praise those things that are wonderful and of wonder.”

Simon Armitage, Poet Laureate

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